

Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 289 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-19421-1.

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The Congo is a highly contradictory colonial and postcolonial place as Andreas Exenberger and Simon Hartmann have pointed out in 2011: as one of the wealthiest regions in the world (in terms of natural resources) and one of the poorest (in terms of living standards), one with a comparatively long history of statehood and partial integration into world economy, but also the scene of some of the worst excesses of the colonial age, it can be considered a typical but also an atypical example of European imperialism at the same time, peculiar also because its colonial mother country was a lesser European power, Belgium.

The last decade and a half have seen renewed interest in Congolese colonial history and led to a remarkable surge in publications, first and foremost within Belgium, but also in Congo itself, as well as internationally. The contributing factors to this renewed fascination are easily identified: the last (second) Congo war, also dubbed the ‘African world war’, which was the deadliest conflict worldwide since 1945, the aftermath of which is still haunting the country (1998–2003 and ongoing); the revelation, admission of and apology for the complicity of Belgian authorities in the 1961 murder of the independence leader Patrice Lumumba in 1999, 2001 and 2002; and the 125th anniversary of the 1885 Berlin Congo Conference in 2010, coinciding with the even more important semi-centennial of the country’s independence in the same year. The peak of this extraordinary wave of interest, which has even been called ‘Congomania in academia’ (Goddeeris/Kiangu), a phenomenon extending to the wider historically interested public as indicated by a series of ground-breaking exhibitions in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (former Congo Museum) on the outskirts of Brussels, has certainly been David Van Reybrouck’s bestselling and highly popular biography of the country which since 2010 has sold more than 150,000 copies in Belgium, and has recently been translated into English (2014).

From an academic point of view, there is good reason to look at the other new publications as well, as surveyed by Goddeeris and Kiangu in 2011. Guy Vanthemsche’s study of the Congolese-Belgian relations between 1885 and 1980, published originally in Dutch in 2007 and now available in English translation (2012), deserves special attention not only by historians of Belgium but also by those who from a comparative European perspective are interested in the imprint colonialism left at home, as it offers an interesting and highly illuminative case study of a lesser colonial power which augments and widens the picture previously largely dominated by accounts of the British and French experiences.

Following A.S. Thomson’s observation in a British context that ‘our understanding of the impact of empires on metropolises has been greatly impoverished by the neglect of the political sphere’, he sets himself the limited aim of reconstructing and analysing the impact the Congo had on Belgium’s domestic political and economic life, consciously leaving out social and cultural aspects of the colonial link (10f.). Realising that this focus in ‘days of blossoming post-colonial studies [on] representation, memory, gender roles, social behaviour and so forth’ might be seen as unmodern, the author nevertheless gives pointers in this direction on several occasions and establishes a sound factual basis that will enable further social and cultural studies that, to quote Thomson again, ‘only assume their full relevance when they are fully integrated with discussion of the political, diplomatic and economic elements.’ (ibid.)

Working largely from official archival sources, Vanthemsche's meticulous analysis is organised into five dense chapters, on the origin of the colonial phenomenon in Belgium which was largely but not exclusively connected to King Leopold II's personal initiatives (ch. 1); the impact of the Congo on Belgium's domestic political life (ch. 2), international position (ch. 3), and economy (ch. 4); and Belgium's relation with independent Congo from 1960 to 1980 (ch. 5). Interestingly, if also slightly unspectacular, this impact was fairly limited and largely confined to some circles of officials and businessmen, except during the takeover of the Congo Free State by Belgium in 1908 and the tumultuous decolonisation in 1960. As a colonial latecomer, having been landed with the colony in a rather abrupt and forced fashion, Vanthemsche sees Belgium's imperial experience as a rather atypical 'reluctant' one, which contrasts significantly with the imperial attitude in larger and older colonial powers, especially Britain and France, but also the Netherlands (269). It would be interesting to see in how far this assessment also applied to the public imagination and perception of the colonial relationship, in all of Belgium's linguistic communities; my personal impression is that the impact was, if not huge then, significantly larger here. It certainly is today.

Having synthesised the political and economic dimensions of imperialism in Belgium Vanthemsche has written a well-documented and fascinating work which will be a reference point for historiographical research on Congolese-Belgian relations for decades to come.